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The Effect of Drama in Education Towards the Acceptance of Different Religious Identities in a Intercultural School

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Abstract

This study investigates using ‘drama in education’ techniques with a group of students at the 87th elementary Intercultural School of Athens over 17 weeks. The study’s aim was to discover the impact of drama in education on the acceptance of religious difference within the school environment. The research is a case-study, using the tools of interviews, observations, researcher's diary and evaluations, and self-evaluations of participants. This research contributes to recognizing that drama in education may be an autonomous educational methodological tool and a useful

educational process that empowers students from diverse cultural identities towards mutual respect, mutual understanding, and coexistence.

Introduction

The role of religion in society is the context for the research on drama in education with a group of students at the 87th Elementary Intercultural School of Athens.

The Role of Religion in Society

Religion is an important social and cultural phenomenon which constitutes the center of any culture, as it affects the context within which people construct their way of life. Religion arises from the inability of human beings to explain some of the mysteries of the world and religious values, have a greater influence than other social institutions (Anderson, 2006; Bauman, 2005; Habermas, 2002; Moulin, 2013; Oppong, 2013). Religious values and practices, however, may adapt each time to cultural, political, and temporal conditions, just the same way people chart their personal evolutionary path which is a result of their experiences during their lifetime. Under these circumstances, religious identity¹ emerges through social interaction and shifts to meet the demands of everyday life, while the contribution of the personal factor plays a crucial role in its choice (Power, 2013; Stirling, Shaw, & Short, 2014).

Religions are also not completely distinct belief systems. The religious beliefs of many people, even within the same religious community, may be identified with ideas and beliefs from a variety of sources, and there may be believers who interpret them in a completely different way from the traditional one (Jackson, 2006). Therefore, religious diversity is present, even within the same religious doctrine.

As much in other collective identities, so in the religious identity, the primary role is given to the identification or invention *of others, of heathen*, who are perceived as a threat to internal values and from whom the believers differ (Astor & Griera, 2015). In this case, religious identities are a divisive factor that creates strict groupings and act as a factor of reproducing existing divisions and discriminations (Patel & Hartman, 2009; Monsma, 2006)².

¹ In the context of the study, when we refer to religious identity, we imply the extent to which the values and practices of the religion play a central role in an individual's idea of himself and influence his/her decisions (Bargerstock, 2016).

² Habermas (1994) points out that global religions have created their own forms of fundamentalism that have often led to practices of intolerance. Such practices are based on religious or historical and philosophical interpretations

Religious identities, however, can also constitute a unifying force, even in times when social conditions favor individuality. Especially when they inspire their actors to show responsibility required for a society to function for the mutual benefit of all, or when they bring together people from different social classes, races and ethnicities playing the role of an adhesive material (Monsma, 2006). In many cases, religions provide answers to crucial flaws of the modern life such as the excessive individualism, the cultural discoloration as a result of globalization, and the decay of the ethical foundations of societies (Milot, 2006).

In the postmodern world we observe that globalization has resulted in the direct contact of cultures and identities all over earth. Religions can more easily spread their inner nature and their practices may be accepted everywhere, regardless of where they first appeared. However, since each religion has a different internal structure, religious identities are considered to be mostly incompatible with each other and each seeks to consolidate its presence by exerting as much influence as possible. Moreover, religions cannot be united or homogenized (El Azzouzi, 2013). As a result, different religious identities come to the foreground and claim their presence.

In Western societies today, religious diversity is strongly crystallized in education as well. This partly happens due to the special role of schools, which is the bridge between the private sphere of families and the public sphere (Martínez-Ariño & Teinturier, 2019). Religious diversity acquires the right of existence and of free expression within the schools and it is controversially linked to issues of identity, immigration, and social cohesion. Under these circumstances, there is a need for a pedagogical approach which in multicultural societies develops understanding and mutual respect for different identities, so that students build bridges with the *other*, the different, *the heathen* (Koukounaras-Liagkis, 2011, 2015).

The Role of Drama in Education

Drama in education is a pedagogical method which can, through exercises and techniques drawn from the dramatic art form, play a positive role in cultivating the principles of intercultural education related to empathy, solidarity, cooperation, intercultural communication (Alkistis, 2008; Bournot-Trites, Belliveau, Spiliotopoulos, & Séror, 2007; Papaioannou & Kondoyanni, 2019). The application of drama techniques creates a student-centered environment, where participants feel free to express their views without fear of being evaluated (Kosti, Kondoyianni, & Tsiaras, 2015). Participants take on roles that are directly related to their social reality, posing themselves in place of *others*. They share the feelings and

of the world that claim exclusivity for a privileged way of life, without being interested in their relationship to other worldviews with which they share the same universe of speech.

thoughts of *others*, in order to better understand the motives and influences of their own actions. Thus, they are involved in processes that lead to the exploration and elaboration of their own values and, we believe, to self-recognition, to the development of social learning, which result to their transformation into personalities who can better understand the nature of *others*. That is the reason why the interactive and participatory nature of drama in education encourages intercultural exchanges, especially in classes with pupils of different religious backgrounds and beliefs (Akyol & Hamamci, 2007; Adıgüzel, 2009; Koukounaras-Liagkis, 2011; Mavroudis & Kondoyanni, 2020; Neelands, 2002; Tsiaras, 2016).

Purpose

The purpose of this article is to demonstrate the contribution of drama techniques in education towards respect and acceptance of different religious identities, in a school environment dominated by religious diversity. The article is a pedagogical proposal for teachers, who are sometimes called upon to deal with issues arising from the religious heterogeneity of their classes. The main research hypothesis refers to whether the application of techniques focused on drama in education in a classroom with diverse national, linguistic, racial and religious identities, will have a positive effect towards the acceptance of the religious identity of *others*.

The Participants

The participants of the research were 8 boys and 13 girls aged 10-12 years old. They were all pupils of 4th (10-11 years old) and 5th grade (11-12 years old) at the 87th Intercultural³ Primary School of Athens. The 87th Intercultural Primary school is located in the center of Athens and is attended mainly by students from refugee, immigrant and minority populations. Since 2005, one of the authors of this article has been teaching physical education at this school. The pupils who participated in the study were selected by drawing lots. They were selected randomly from a wider cohort consisting of a variety of students' ethnic and religious backgrounds. Nine (9) pupils were from the Muslim minority of Thrace, seven (7) were Albanians (Muslims), one (1) Syrian (Muslim), one (1) Afghani (Muslim), one (1) Bulgarian (orthodox Christian) and two were from Greek background (orthodox Christian). Six (6) of the participants are of Roma⁴ origin. The participants' mother tongues were Greek, Turkish,

³ Inter-cultural schools were established at the 80s, initially with the purpose of educating the children of repatriating Greeks. Gradually and as the Greek society was transformed into a multi-ethnic one, these schools accepted a large number of immigrant children. The curriculum followed in these schools does not substantially vary from the one practised at the rest of the schools on the country.

⁴ Roma, also called Romany or Gypsies (considered pejorative), an ethnic group of traditionally itinerant people who originated in northern India but live in modern times worldwide, principally in Europe. Most Roma speak

Albanian, Arabic, Farsi, and Romani.

Methodology

The case-study uses qualitative methodology as it was considered to be the most appropriate to investigate issues related to complex social realities and human behaviors (Alkistis, 2008; Mason, 2003). Research tools include interviews, participatory observation, keeping a researcher's diary, and students' evaluations of the research.

The method of interviewing were chosen because they can better explore the perceptions, thoughts and experiences of the participants compared to questionnaires (Robson, 2007). Interviews were semi-structured that allowed greater depth in the research topics, as they allowed the modification of the order and content of the questions according to the respondent (Isari & Pourkos, 2015). Students who did not have Greek as their mother tongue were able to express their views more comfortably in this way. Interviews were conducted with the same questions before and after the implementation of the drama techniques. The questionnaires of Danochristou (2012) and Sextou (2006) were adapted to the needs of this research.

Participatory⁵ observation was another technique employed for the needs of the current study, since the observer-author was also an integral part of the team as the organiser and the conductor⁶ of the various activities. (Isari & Pourkos, 2015). Two teachers, responsible for the corresponding classes of the participants, served as the external observers of the whole process with the intention of ensuring the objectivity as well as the volume of data produced (Hay, 2000). The second observer is also a psychologist with extensive experience in qualitative research and she trained the third observer in observation, during the physical education class. The whole process took place during the physical education class because there was no drama class offered in the school at that period. The second observer had also the role of the *critical friend*, who, with her neutral attitude, provided feedback throughout all stages of the research. The 'Observation Key,' which refers to what exactly was observed, was completed during the implementation of the program by the observers and was formulated according to the one used by Danochristou (2012) and Katsarou (1998). The recording of the observations took place after the end of each meeting and gradually took the form of a diary. The diary records the researcher's thoughts, dialogues between the

some form of Romany, a language closely related to the modern Indo-European languages of northern India, as well as the major language of the country in which they live (Britannica, Encyclopaedia).

⁵ Participatory observation is the appropriate research tool for the systematic observation of social behavior in the natural environment in which this behavior occurs (Iosifidis, 2008).

⁶ The researcher has studied theatre at the National Theater of Northern Greece. The researcher also has experience in qualitative methodology from the research he conducted for his Master's degree.

participants, emotions, evaluations, and reflection data in order to plan and control the research more thoroughly (Avgitidou, 2011). The researcher's diary in this perspective was another source of data production.

Finally, data were generated from the evaluations made by the participants about the program, during both the interviews and the reflection throughout the implementation of the program. At the end of the intervention the pupils evaluated the whole program through the drama techniques in education (e.g., role play, hot chair, radio station). Summarizing data generation resulted from three different perspectives, namely those of the participants, the researcher, and the external observers.

Description of the Drama in Educational Program

The intervention program focused on drama was completed through seventeen (17) meetings and workshops. The initiation of the program took place on November 27th, 2014, immediately after conducting the pre-interviews. The workshops took place in the school's assembly hall.

During the first three (3) meetings, the program focused on developing relationships between participants, cooperation, trust, and better communication between the participants as well as to their adaptation to the specific educational methodology. In the next three (3) meetings, the main goal was on the realization and management of emotions as well as helping participants explore how stereotypes are born. From the seventh to the fifteenth meeting (7th-15th), pupils explored issues arising from their coexistence with different national, linguistic, religious, and racial identities. During the sixteenth (16th) meeting, the activities aimed to make the participants more familiar with their own unique personality, while in the seventeenth (17th) meeting the evaluation of the program took place. The central goal of the whole process was the development of empathy, a skill that improves the quality of human relationships (Akyol & Hamamci, 2007; Mavroudis & Bournelli, 2019) as well as the cultivation of personal contact between participants which reduces prejudices and stereotypes and leads to respect and acceptance of the *other* (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006).

The program included activities from Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed dramatizations of stories written by the pupils themselves, individual and group improvisations, activities of physical expression, creativity, imagination, rhythm, active listening, understanding the other's perspective, development of self-awareness, and activities that served the objectives of the program.

The program was completed at the end of April 2015, followed by post interviews. Student interviews were then transcribed, the observation data, the researcher's diary and the

participants' evaluations were also assessed, and conclusions were drawn.

Results and Discussion

Pupils' responses during the interviews indicate that religions can often be a divisive factor. Josef (2004) points out that the sense of *belonging* which is given to people by their cultural identities, such as religious one, is always inherent in relation to *others*. This feeling can easily lead to separations and divisions. We observe the students answering the questions about belonging: P18⁷, initial interviews: *"I want to share the same god with my friends. That's important to me"*. P10, in initial: *"I say he has another god, I do not like that. We believe in Allah, you do not know"*. P12, also in initial interviews observed and added a detail about different faith: *"When I want to make a new friend, I ask him which god he believes in. My friends do not believe in Christ"*. P18, initial interviews: *"I feel sad, because I want our god"*. P2, post interview observed that: *"I feel angry, because the child has another god"*. P11, post interview gave a judgment that: *"we have another religion and we do not talk to others"*.

However, the results of the interviews also showed the tolerance of many participants towards the different religion even before the implementation of the program. The tolerance, as Habermas Blair, & Debray (2008) points out, when it is present in the daily life of the school, reflects the way with which pupils recognize the right to exist to those beliefs and lifestyles that they may reject themselves. According to this perception, the initial interviews include phrases such as: P1: *"Yes, he could become my friend, because I do not care for religion"*. P5, recognized the right of everyone to believe where he/she wants: *"I think it is the right of every child to worship his/her own god"*. P6, also recognized the same right: *"I do not mind, let him/her have any god he/she wants"*. P11, referred to how much he likes the celebrations of other religions: *"I would love to have at school other religious celebrations of other gods"*. P12, in initial also referred to how much he likes the existence of other religions in the school: *"I like my school. Not all believe in your God, in Christ. I believe in other god, other children in another, that's good"*. P13, agreed that the coexistence of religions is something good: *"Our school with children from other countries and other gods is fine"*. P14, stated about his friends: *"I make friends both Christians and Muslims"*. P21, in initial confirmed that religion does not play an important role in deciding with who he will become friends: *"Yes, he/she can join my friends. He/she will have a different god and we will have another, I do not mind"*.

The issue of different religious identity has never been a cause of tension and friction within

⁷ P= Pupil said

the group and throughout the research. This spirit of tolerance is also reflected in the wider school community. In the last fifteen years that the researcher has been teaching at the school, there have never been any quarrels or disputes for religious reasons. Perhaps this happens due to the reason that the educational institution is extremely careful in this area. Despite the fact that the Christian prayer is performed daily in the school as is traditional in Greek government schools, it nevertheless fully respects the religious identity of every pupil and his/her religious customs (hijab, food), celebrating not only Christian but also Muslim religious celebrations. Activities also take place for the Kurdish New Year and the celebration of the Roma's Ederlezi. Milot (2006) states that understanding different religious perspectives can be taught and can serve as a bridge between people. The educational institution itself respecting the religious diversity of the pupils may transmit this respect to the children who are going to live in an environment, with (or rather) different religious worldviews than their own. With regard to this, the role of teachers is considered extremely important.

The daily contact of pupils with different religions has also established relationships of trust among them and has resulted to friendships regardless of religion, thus confirming the *theory of contact*.⁸ As Appiah (2006) points out, social practices change from the contact with the people who have different views. According to this perspective different religious identities are not perceived by pupils as a threat. For example, P9 (Muslim), when asked about how he feels when he meets children of different faiths, using the experiential knowledge he gained through his friendship with a Christian peer, answers: *"I have no problem. Let's say X... believes in Christ and me in Allah. Fine"*.

Another parameter that is probably related to the observed tolerance towards the different religious traditions, is the fact that several children in the school are of Albanian origin. According to Nitsiakos (2010), Albanians were not particularly interested in religion, because their national identity is rooted on its ancient Illyrian past. Although the Albanian religious landscape is much more complex, there are still numerous mixed marriages and a multi-religious coexistence (e.g., Catholics, Orthodox, Muslims), which was reflected from the beginning in the Albanian national elite (Kaplani, 2002). This culture of religious mutual acceptance or indifference to religious segregation by pupils of Albanian descent (Kaplani, 2002) is likely to contribute positively to the tolerant climate observed within the group and at the school in general. The statement made by P5 (of Albanian origin) during the post-interviews is worth mentioning: *"... I am not very interested in religion"*. And to another question: *"I do not care about this thing with God, nor do I believe much"*. These answers are

⁸ According to this theory, interpersonal contact between people belonging to different groups can lead to a reduction of stereotypes and mutual acceptance (Allport, 1954)

in line with the suggestions of Oppong (2013) and Brubaker (2013). Oppong (2013) claims that the power of religious identity depends on the intensity of the individual's religious commitment and the influence of religion on the family and its individual behavior. Brubaker (2013) suggests that the degree of involvement of one with a particular religious tradition should not be taken for granted, demonstrating the volatile nature of religious identities.

The observations of the external observers and the diary of the researcher contain references to this climate of tolerance, but also to the lack of information and ignorance regarding the issues of religion. During the twelfth (12th) meeting, for example, when a discussion was held on the various religions, it was found that pupils' knowledge on the subject was very limited. The element of pupils' ignorance about the global religions, but also the current catechistic character of the religious education course in Greek schools, which leaves no room for non-Orthodox to attend, demonstrate the need to adapt the religious education course to intercultural education. For example, a Muslim female student during one of the initial interviews answers: P12: *"Let's say it's nice when we are talking about Christmas and Easter, but when we have a religious class, the teacher tells us to draw. It would be nice to do a religious class, my grandmother allows me, but the teacher does not want to"*. According to Habermas (2006), world religions claim their place in the postmodern era, as their cognitive essence has not yet been exhausted. Therefore, a religious education class, as a pioneer in intercultural education, could adopt material, content, and practices of religions that concern all the children at the school. This form of religious education would allow all students to participate in the classroom the class by engaging in processes of interaction with religious differences and traditions. Koukounaras-Liagkis (2010) agrees with this view, recognizing that such a religious education can play an important role in getting to know each *other*, in interculturalism, empathy, and solidarity. Giagazoglou (2007) also points out that the religious dimension in intercultural education should encourage young people to understand the phenomena of faith and its lack, and connect with modern existential and social problems. Van der Kooij, De Ruyter and Miedema (2013) also agree that schools should not be identified with one and only religious worldview. This is a lifelong process. Pupils may be encouraged to realize their own about their own worldview and the worldview of *others*, as well as the impact that religions have on people's lives. In this way, pupils are encouraged to better understand both themselves and *others*.

The program included references to popular religions to enrich pupils' knowledge. The participants talked about how they pray, about the food they eat at the festivities and exchanged information about their religion. As there was a risk that this approach would lead to a distant, *exotic* image of different religions with consolidated elements (Androusou & Magos, 2001), the focus shifted to help pupils developing a critical relationship with religious racism by recognizing common and different elements between the religions. The school,

after all, should broaden pupils' perception of the common characteristics which unite people on earth (Saito, 2010). The discussion held at the ninth (9th) meeting adopted such a perspective. Pupils referred to religions: *"Everyone kneels"*, *"everyone has a bowed head when praying"*, *"we all wear amulets, like Christians wear the cross"*, *"adults do not eat during Ramadan, as Christians do not eat during the Easter"*. Pupils referred to the fact that Muslims *"go to the mosque and the hodja, while Christians -to the church and the priest"* and discovered through the feast of Ederlezi that St. George exists in both Islam and Christianity. The majority of Muslim children even stated that they eat pork, just like Christians. These statements confirm the view of Jackson (2006) that religious rules and practices are not followed in the same way by all members of the same religion. In fact, they are fluid, much more complex and without clear boundaries.

According to the researcher's diary, the participants, being encouraged to dramatize a story of their peer who was not invited to a party due to his different religion, participated in a critical dialogue around the issue that arose. The pupils, recognizing elements from their own social experience, focused on the negative emotions experienced by the protagonist. They wondered and tried to find out the causes and consequences that led to this problematic situation, while they made suggestions to overturn it in favor of the protagonist. Most of the pupils advised him to turn to the teacher, which emphasizes the teacher-centered nature of the education, some of them said to go to the party without invitation and some others that it does not matter which god one believes in, as god is one and is for all, *"and God does not want injustice either"*. The event also had a strong impact on the pupils' emotional intelligence. The pupil who was not invited stated that he felt *sorrow, grief*, and that he wants to cry, whereas the same feelings and the feeling of anger were experienced by the pupil who shared the invitations. When asked why he did not invite his classmate, he justified that he was pressured to do so by his mother. The activity mobilized even pupils who had difficulty expressing themselves. Furthermore, some of the pupils' argued: *"no one would like this to happen"* and *"no child wants to be in the place of the child who will not go to the party"*. These arguments provide evidence of group empathy towards the discriminated pupil.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that when the children were asked what they value in someone to make him/her their friend, they answered: P4, noticed that he likes the friend: *"If he is calm, if he does not hit"*. P6, added: *"I would like my friends to be good, not to fight, and not to tell secrets"*. P7, referred to respect: *"I want my friends not to call me names, to respect me"*. P9, responded: *"When I want to make a new friend I see if he is a good kid"*. P10, added his opinion on who a bad kid is: *"I see if he is good, whoever calls names is a bad kid, I do not want him"*. P13, also expressed his own view: *"... I see that he does not tease the children, does not steal, does not break windows"*. P14, referred to how much he values confidentiality: *"I want her not to tell my secrets so I can trust her and not to be a gossip"*.

P21, similarly said: “*I want her to be good with me and to have a good time together*”. Answers like the above are close to the thought of Appiah (1994), who emphasizes that identities must also recognize the fundamental ethical unity of humanity and not only the central place of difference within human identity. As participants are not just members of specific religious traditions, they seem to prioritize the personality of individual, regardless of their religion.

The research confirmed our research hypothesis for a positive contribution of drama in education to the acceptance of religious diversity. Its findings are similar to the research of Koukounaras-Liagkis (2011), who states that through the drama practices the views and perceptions of pupils about different religious identities were influenced and changed, as *the different* became familiar and respectable. And these changes, no matter how small, are very important as big social changes are the result of changes on a personal level (Koukounaras-Liagkis, 2011).

Boundaries and Limitations of Research

1. The 87th Intercultural School of Athens is characterized by large school through flow of the student population. Thus, while twenty-five (25) pupils started participating in the beginning of the research process, gradually the participants were limited to twenty (20), because some of the original cohort moved to other schools or places.
2. The volume of data production might have been higher if permission had been granted to videotape the implementation process of the program.
3. The results of the intervention could be ascertained in the long-term perspective by conducting a new survey on the same student population.

Conclusion

The non-competitive nature of the educational drama, the security of the rehearsal that ensures the non-competitive nature and the non-evaluation of the process and the final product, the various stimuli for self-action and initiative, as well as the respect of the principle of non-exclusion make the drama in education an important and useful educational method. The experiential collaborations experienced by participants motivated them to manage their emotional world, to deepen their needs, to ask about themselves, to engage in empathetic negotiations of themselves with others, and to develop multiple forms of interaction. Therefore, they become partners and co-creators of a new knowledge that they realize or construct, which is related to the image that each person has formed of himself/herself and the *other*. That is why drama in education may encourage people from different religious

backgrounds and diverse identities to mutual respect and mutual understanding.

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Appendix
THE OBSERVATION KEY

THE ATTITUDE OF THE PARTICIPANTS AGAINST THE PROGRAM

POSITIVE ATTITUDE

Each student:

1. Actively participates in the activities
2. Shows interest in understanding them
3. Listen carefully to the researcher
4. Takes initiatives for action
5. Expresses joy when participating in the program
6. Does not make a fuss

THE ATTITUDE OF THE PARTICIPANTS AGAINST OTHERNESS AND IN THEIR PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

NEGATIVE ATTITUDE

A student:

1. Does not work with other children
2. Does not interact with non-friends
3. Is not accepted by the rest of the group
4. Is not friendly with the other children
5. Is isolated
6. Is competitive
7. Is indifferent to other children
8. Teases other children with malice
9. Bothers the team
10. Produces ethnocentric discourse
11. Makes derogatory or other inappropriate comments about cultural identity of other children
12. Reacts emotionally to otherness and the other Group members:
 - a. Expressing mockery
 - b. Expressing discomfort - irritability
 - c. Expressing anger
13. Reacts physically or adopts a non-verbal communication in general, which indicate the subject's relationship to otherness and relationships with the other children by adopting:
 - d. Grimaces of disapproval
 - e. Aggressive gestures
 - f. Refusal to touch any members of the group
 - g. Physical distance from other children
14. Anything else is done or said, whether it is relevant at the time or not

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